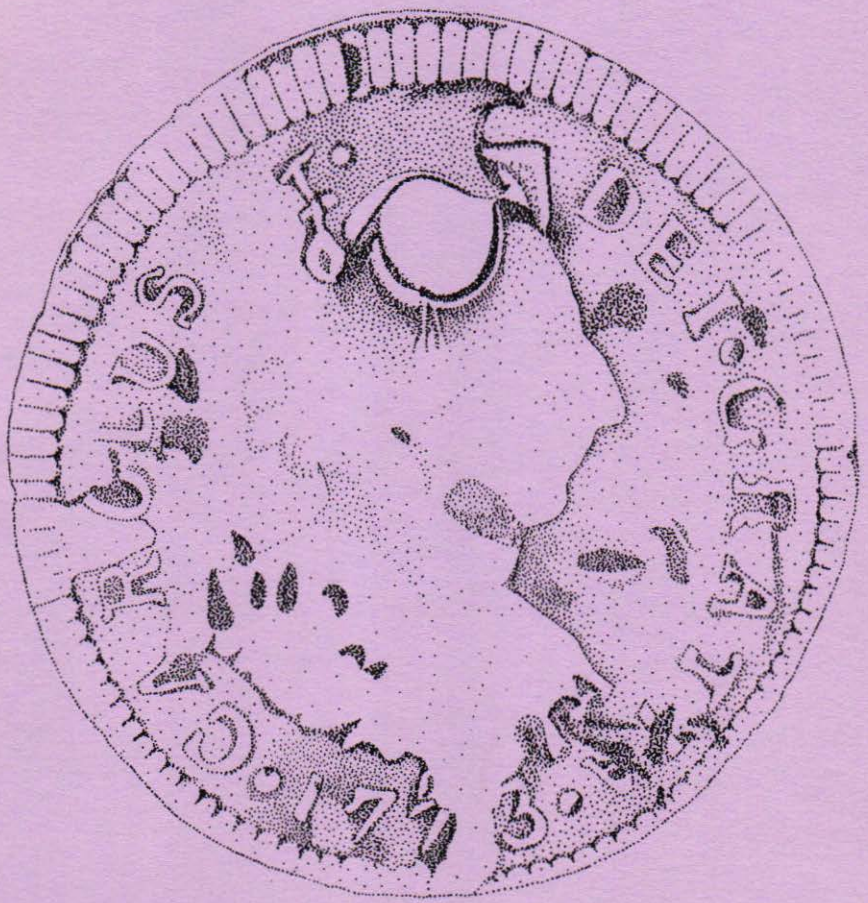
Understanding Slavery: The Lives of Eighteenth Century African-Americans



Chicora Foundation, Inc.
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The cover illustration is of a 1773 Spanish 8 reales silver coin minted in Mexico. Found in a South Carolina slave settlement, the coin had been pierced and was probably worn as an ornament. Similar coins have been found at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and at Harmony Hall plantation in Georgia. Some believe that the silver was thought to help keep away sickness. Others believe that this is an example of African ethnicity. Still others suggest that it may simply represent a slave's attempt to make an adornment.

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Slavery. The very term inspires revulsion, embarrassment, anger, and humiliation. For many people, their first real understanding of African-American slavery came with reading Alex Haley's *Roots*, or watching its adaptation to television. Too often textbooks and history classes are silent, discussing slavery only passively.

Yet, the history of South Carolina inexorably intertwined with slavery. Everything on the plantation – the roads, the buildings, the fences, the gardens, the crops – were the result of African-American sweat and blood. There likely would be no South Carolina history were it not for the labors of the African-Americans brought to these shores in slave ships.

In South Carolina were concentrated many of the richest planters in the United States – and the greatest number of slaves. The planters' perceived economic and political interests substantially shaped the policy of South Carolina and, in turn, affected the history of our nation. South Carolina played a premier role in the defense of slavery.

Slavery continues to shape American life – more so than many blacks, or whites, might like to admit. It must be understood if we wish to understand our history.

Yet even historians have not always been successful at coping with slavery. Ulrich Phillips, writing in 1918 for a white audience, was afraid to criticize the remnant Southern gentry in his book, *American Negro Slavery*. Instead he claimed that slavery helped civilize "savage" Africans, ignoring the fullness of African culture. Later, in the late 1950s, Kenneth Stampp's *Peculiar Institution* coincided with the birth of the civil rights movement and his writing has been characterized as having the "suppressed passion of a liberal scholar." More recently, Eugene Genoveses's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, written in the 1970s, offers a celebration of black cultural resistance. Each offers a very different view of slavery.

Beginning in the late 1970s archaeologists began to realize that there was much to learn about African-American slavery and that archaeology might offer

the best hope of achieving a new and different view.

One of the problems with history is that the African-American slaves are "invisible people." History is written by the literate and the wealthy. This means, in Southern society, history has most commonly been written by the plantation owners — wealthy white men. Their concern with black slaves was largely limited to economic issues — How much did a slave cost? How long did a slave live? How many children might a slave have? How much food had to be allocated for slaves? Rarely do we see anything in the plantation diaries or records that helps us understand how slaves *lived*.

Further, conventional historical accounts can be easily distorted, either intentionally or even unknowingly. So slave owners might not always be telling us the truth in their plantation accounts.

Archaeology, on the other hand, provides us with a better means of understanding the lives of African-American slaves. Not only does archaeology specialize in understanding the lives of the people being studied, but it is harder to distort these lifeways. Archaeology, however, is certainly not perfect. Many things, such as kinship or religion, leave little evidence for the archaeologist. Some artifacts, such as basketry, may quickly decay. Other evidence may be misunderstood. And, of course, many archaeological sites are never even studied — some are thoughtlessly destroyed, while others are just never found.

Archaeologists cleaning a portion of an excavated slave structure in the Waccamaw Neck area for photographs.

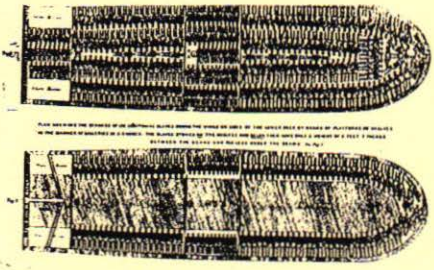
By combining history and archaeology, however, it is possible to better understand how African-American slaves lived here in South Carolina. And by better understanding slavery we can dispel a lot of the myths and come to terms with our past.

The African Slave Trade and South Carolina

Slavery was well established in the "New World" by the Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch, who all sent African slaves to work in both North and South America during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The English began aggressively trading in what was called "black ivory" during the middle of the seventeenth century, spurred on by the need for laborers in the hot, humid sugar fields on the West Indian islands of Barbados, St. Christopher, the Bermudas, and Jamaica.

By the time Charles Towne was settled in 1670, Englishmen from the West Indies were well acquainted with slavery and the huge profits they could reap from the toil of others. Slavery was therefore considered an essential ingredient in the successful establishment of cash crop plantations in South Carolina.

Like other European nations, England created the Royal African Company to underwrite the slave trade. A string of forts and "slave factories" were established from the Cape Verde Islands to the Bight of Biafra. But the slave trade would likely not have been as "successful" were it not for the "unholy alliance" between the English (and other European nations) and the African kingdoms on whose territories the forts stood. The English slave traders did their best to dupe the native kings and each native king did his best to obtain the maximum amount of goods in exchange for the slaves he had for sale.



This loading plan of a slave ship showed how to crowd as many slaves as possible into the typical cargo hold.

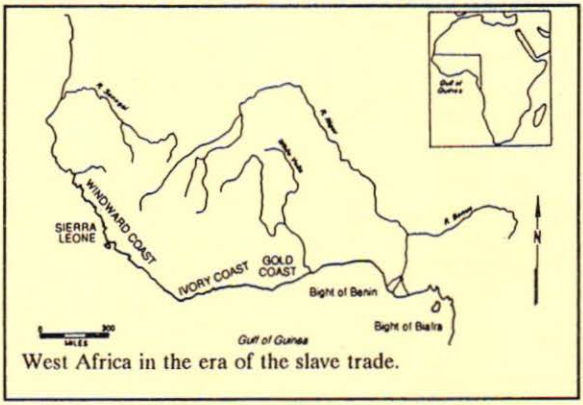
For their cargoes of human flesh, the traders brought iron and copper bars, brass pans and kettles, cowrey shells, old guns, gun powder, cloth, and alcohol. In return, ships might load on anywhere from 200 to over 600 African slaves, stacking them like cord wood and allowing almost no breathing room. The crowding was so severe, the ventilation so bad, and the food so poor during the "Middle Passage" of between five weeks and three months that a loss of around 14 to 20% of their "cargo" was considered the normal price of doing business. This slave trade is thought to have transported at least 10 million, and perhaps as many as 20

million, Africans to the American shores.

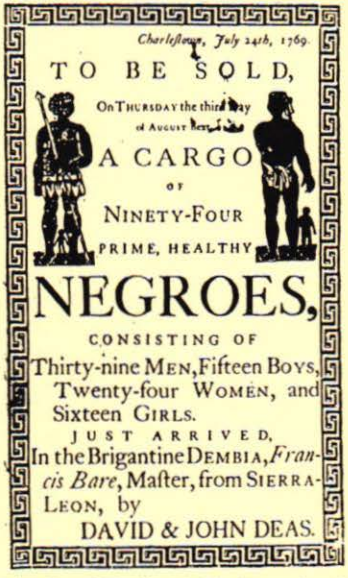
The slave traders discovered that Carolina planters had very specific ideas concerning the ethnicity of the slaves they sought. No less a merchant than Henry Laurens wrote that:

> The Slaves from the River Gambia are preferr'd to all others with us [here in Carolina] save the Gold Coast. . . . next to Them the Windward Coast are preferr'd to Angolas.

In other words, slaves from the region of Senegambia and present-day Ghana were preferred. At the other end of the scale were the "Calabar" or Ibo or "Bite" slaves from the Niger Delta, who Carolina planters would purchase only if no others were available. In the middle were those from the Windward Coast and Angola.



West Africa in the era of the slave trade.


Charleſtown, July 24th, 1769.

TO BE SOLD,

On THURSDAY the third Day of AUGUST next,

A CARGO

OF

NINETY-FOUR

PRIME, HEALTHY

NEGROES,

CONSISTING OF

Thirty-nine MEN, Fifteen BOYS, Twenty-four WOMEN, and Sixteen GIRLS.

JUST ARRIVED,

In the Brigantine DEMBIA, *Francis Bare*, Maſter, from SIERRA-LEON, by

DAVID & JOHN DEAS.

In 1769 the firm of David and John Deas advertised the sale of 94 African-Americans in Charleston, South Carolina.

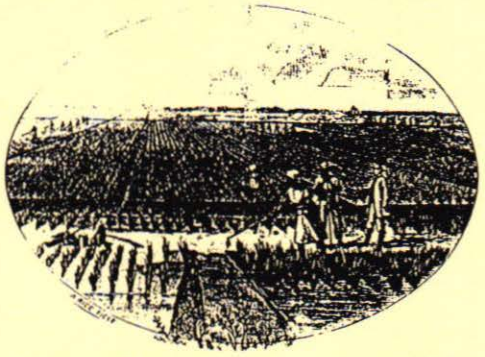
Carolina planters developed a vision of the "ideal" slave – tall, healthy, male, between the ages of 14 and 18, "free of blemishes," and as dark as possible. For these ideal slaves Carolina planters in the eighteenth century paid, on average, between £100 and £200 sterling – in today's money that is between $11,630 and $23,200!

Many of these slaves were almost immediately put to work in the rice fields of

eighteenth century South Carolina. Many writers of the period remarked that there was no harder, or more unhealthy, work possible:

> negroes, anckle and even mid-leg deep in water which floats an ouzy mud, and exposed all the while to a burning sun which makes the very air they breathe hotter than the human blood; these poor wretches are then in a furness of stinking putrid effluvia: a more horrible employment can hardly be imagined.

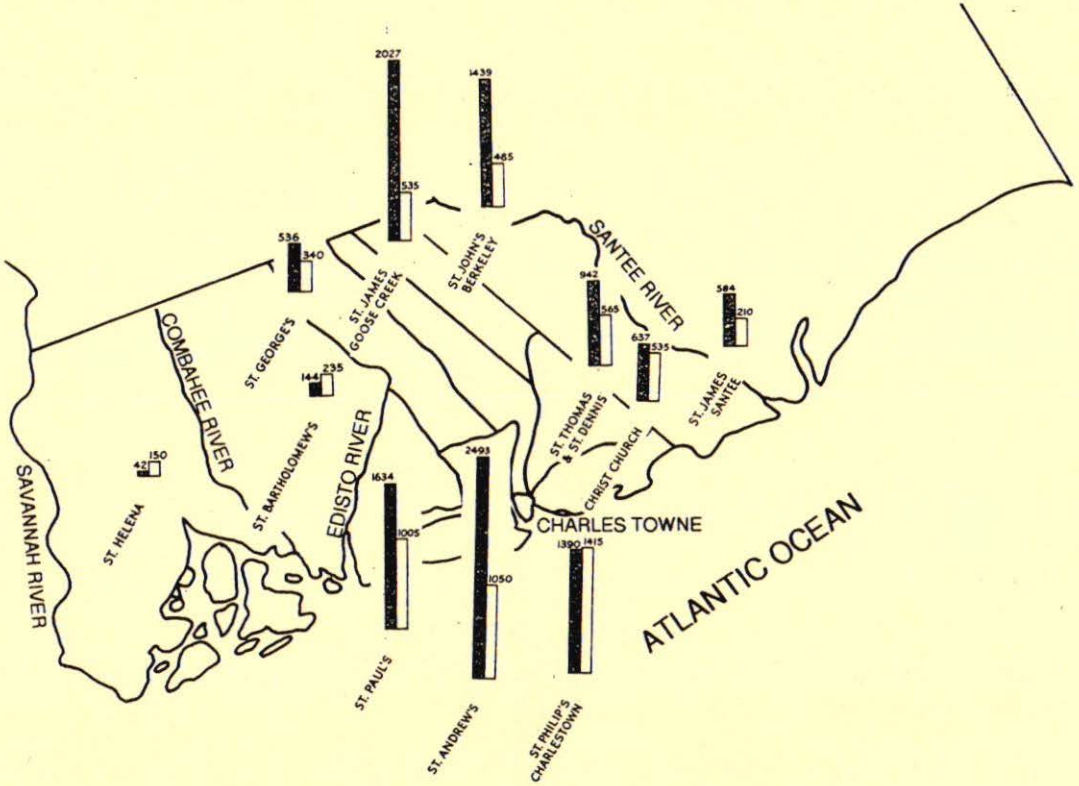
In fact, these Carolina rice fields have been described as charnel houses for African-American slaves. Malaria and enteric diseases killed off the low country slaves at rates which are today almost unbelievable. Based on the best plantation accounts it is clear that while about one out of every three slave children on the cotton plantations died before reaching the age of 16, nearly two of every three African-American children on rice plantations failed to reach their sixteenth birthday and over a third of all slave children died before their first birthday. Rice's macabre record of slave deaths has been traced to two primary factors — one was malaria, the other was the infants' feebleness at birth, probably the result of the mothers' own chronic malaria and their general exhaustion from rice cultivation during pregnancy.



Freed slaves working in a rice field much as they did in the eighteenth century (*Harpers Weekly*, January 5, 1867).

After their horrific "Middle Passage," over 40% of the African slaves reaching the British colonies before the American Revolution passed through South Carolina. Almost all of these slaves entered the Charleston port, being briefly quarantined on Sullivan Island, before being sold in Charleston's slave markets.

Once in South Carolina what was the lives of these slaves like? How did they live? What did they eat? What did their houses look like? How did they prepare their food? What kinds of possessions did they have? What did their pottery look like? White masters had little or no interest in recording these details for future generations. Slavery was an economic issue and the only details worthy of being consistently recorded were those related to the value of their slaves or



African-American and white populations of colonial South Carolina by parishes in 1720.

the value of their production. The daily lives of these new African-Americans was probably poorly understood and certainly of little importance to the planters. These are all questions which can only be answered through archaeology.

The Lives of African-American Slaves in Carolina During the Eighteenth Century

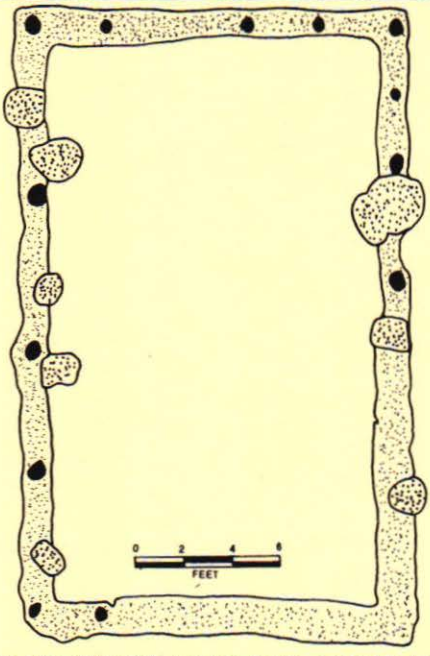
Historians like Daniel Littlefield, William Dusinberre, and Peter Wood are beginning to help us understand something about the lives of South Carolina's first African-Americans.

For example, we know that South Carolina had a clear black majority from about 1708 through most of the eighteenth century. By 1720 there were about 18,000 people living in South Carolina and 65% of these were enslaved African-Americans. In St. James Goose Creek, a parish just north of Charles Towne, there were only 535 whites and 2,027 black slaves.

The massive investment in slavery and land by the planters, the almost universal focus on rice and its particular labor requirements, even the planters' long summer absenteeism, all gave the low country plantations a special character. This slave-based agricultural system created a proud "aristocracy" whose impact on American history was spectacular, leading first to the American Revolution and later to the Civil War.

Whether we speak of food, or housing, or health, callousness toward the slaves' welfare was the hallmark of the system.

Archaeological research shows us that slavery in the early eighteenth century was



Example of a wall-trench structure found on Daniels Island in Berkeley County.

very different from the view we have of antebellum slavery. For example, the neat rows of wood frame slave cabins which seem so typical on plantations in the 1850s were a late reform, developed by Southern planters in an effort to deflect abolitionist outrage. The early eighteenth century slaves often lived in minimal huts built of upright poles set in a trench and covered in clay. The roofs were probably covered in palmetto fronds or other thatch.

Archaeologists call these houses "wall-trench structures" and they were used at least up to the American Revolution. Most had no fireplaces and they were built with earthen floors. The buildings range from about 13 feet in length and only 9 feet in width up to about 21 feet in length and around 14 feet in width. There were only a few windows and these were all open, with perhaps only a shutter to close out the bad weather.

House near Edgefield, South Carolina built by a freed BaKongo slave and photographed in 1907.

These mudwall, thatched wall-trench buildings had relatively short lifespans, perhaps only ten years or so. They were quickly attacked by termites and other pests. The wet Southern climate eroded the clay used to plaster the walls. The houses were probably very cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Consequently, most activities took place outside and the structures were used primarily during bad weather.

Some trace these buildings to Africa, pointing out the similarities in styles. And certainly it seems likely that the design of these earliest slave houses were influenced by their inhabitants. In the 1840s or 1850s the slave Okra built an African-style house with wattle and daub walls and a thatched roof of palmetto leaves on a Georgia Sea Island plantation. The owner, however, made Okra tear the house down, proclaiming that he wanted no "African hut" on his plantation. As late as 1907 a clearly African-style house was built near Edgefield, South Carolina. The former slave explained that he modeled his house on traditional Kongo styles.

Recent archaeological studies suggest that there were a number of different styles of early slave houses. Some, while still having a wall-trench design, may have incorporated a fireplace — perhaps reflecting the gradual introduction

of European forms. Archaeologists are still exploring the diversity present in these early slave dwellings so it is likely that we will find even more styles as we continue our research.

Archaeological research suggests that some houses were built in loosely clustered settlements. Sometimes the houses were oriented with the topography, running along sand ridges for example. Regardless, these early eighteenth century slave settlements don't seem to resemble the highly organized and carefully arranged settlements found later in the nineteenth century. Probably, through time, owners exerted more control and influence on their slaves, forcing them to live in more "appropriate" or European-like settlements.

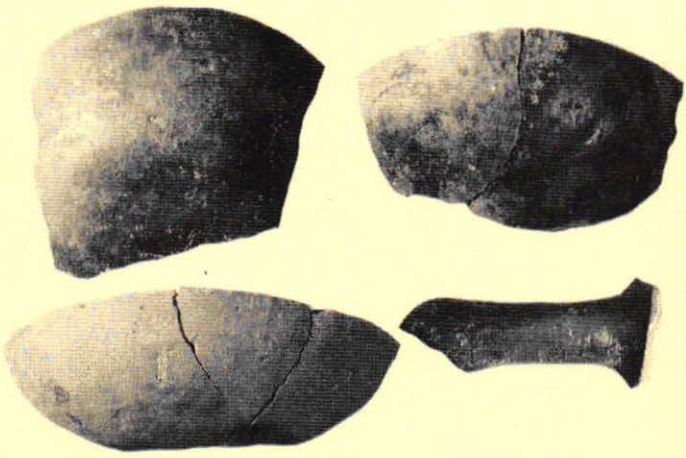
Since so much of the slaves' lives were spent outside their houses, archaeologists are also discovering that the slave settlements often exhibit outdoor hearths, or places where the African-Americans prepared their food. Large pits, filled with charcoal and broken pottery may be found near the houses. Also present are small smudge pits where the slave burned corn cobs, perhaps to keep away the insects.

Since the wall-trench houses required large quantities of clay to cover the wattle walls, archaeologists are also finding many large pits probably dug by the slaves to gather clay. Once excavated, these pits (which may be three or four feet in diameter and several feet deep) were quickly filled with yard trash – bits of broken pottery, animal bone, and other refuse.

The slaves' diet was probably dominated by plant foods. Especially on coastal plantations broken and dirty rice was plentiful and may have been the staple of the slave diet. Meat was probably a relatively uncommon luxury and, when available, almost certainly represented the least meaty cuts of the animal such as the legs, feet, jaw, and skull. Better cuts were probably reserved for the planter's table.

In the eighteenth century slaves mostly ate stews or other "one-pot" meals. These might consist of small quantities of meat, especially hog fat, used as seasoning combined with large quantities of plant foods. Allowed to simmer, or stew, on a low fire during the day, the meal would be ready by nightfall when the slaves were finally finished with their daily tasks. The presence of these "one-pot" meals is not only supported by the food remains found by the archaeologist, but also by the presence of small clay cooking pots and small clay bowls. Rarely are plate forms found. In fact, it is even uncommon to find eating utensils at these early slave sites.

The most common type of pottery the slaves had is a low-fired earthenware called "colono ware." It is thought to have been made by the slaves, perhaps styled on African pottery. Very similar pottery was also being made by the Native Americans during this same period, so it is also possible that some colono ware was actually made by Indians and sold to the plantation owner for



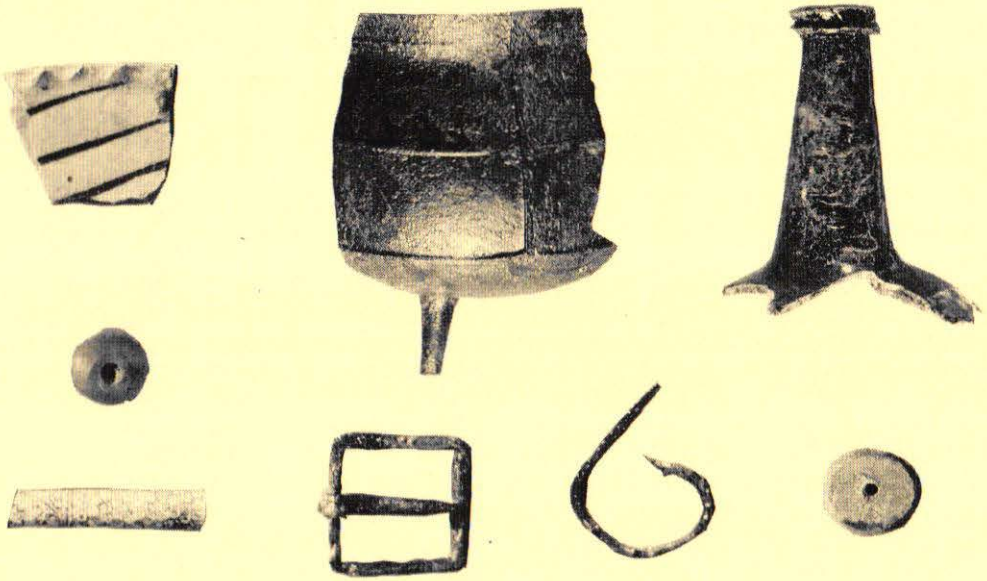
Examples of colono ware pottery probably made by African-American slaves in the eighteenth century. The specimen in the lower right hand corner is a handle.

use by his slaves. This colono ware pottery dominates early eighteenth century slave settlements and often almost no European pottery will be found. Some vessels are simple bowl forms, while others were made to mimic European styles. Archaeologists are currently exploring this pottery, using a variety of chemical studies to help better understand whether it was made by Native Americans or African-Americans.

At the earliest eighteenth century slave settlements there are very few artifacts. It seems that about all the slaves "possessed" were a few colono ware pots, and one or two green glass bottles salvaged from the plantation owner and perhaps used to store water. Other kitchen items are exceedingly uncommon. Even simple utensils are rarely found at eighteenth century slave settlements and slaves probably had to make do with wooden spoons (which won't be preserved in the archaeological record). Likewise, glasses and cups are almost unheard off. In fact, fresh water was even uncommon at many plantation settlements.

Personal possessions are uncommon, although occasionally glass beads may be found. Many archaeologists believe the importance of these beads can be traced back to Africa. Likewise, the presence of bits of copper wire in the archaeological record may suggest decorative items used by the African-Americans. The very few clothing items that are recovered may include buckles, buttons, and occasionally a pin or thimble for sewing.

Many of the eighteenth century slave settlements have fragments of kaolin tobacco pipes. These were apparently one of the few "luxury" items given to the slaves and tobacco use was common. There are almost no furniture items,



Artifacts typical of slavery. Shown here is a fragment of lead glazed slipware, a common utilitarian European ceramic; a broken iron kettle, which might be used to cook stews; a broken dark green bottle neck (upper row, left to right); a glass bead; a short piece of a kaolin tobacco pipe stem; an iron buckle; a fish hook, and a lead fishing weight (lower row, left to right).

since the slaves' houses were probably devoid of all but the most rustic furnishings. Sometimes a lead fishing weight will be found, providing evidence that the slaves sought out food sources to help them vary their diets.

It may surprise some people to learn that slaves, in the early eighteenth century, often had access to guns. Archaeologists find gun flints, lead shot, and even gun parts in the slave settlements. Fire arms were given to the slaves to scare birds away from the crops and to provide meat for the planter's table. They were probably also highly valued since they could be used to supplement the slaves' own diet.

Everything that most slaves "owned" could probably be put in a small pile. The archaeological evidence suggests the emphasis was always placed on "essential" items, such as pottery. "Non-essential" items, such as decorative objects, are so uncommon they must have been treasured by the slave community.

For More Information

If you would like more information about the lives of African-American slaves, look for these books and articles at your local library or ask your librarian to get them for you through Inter-library Loan.

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What is Chicora Foundation?

Chicora began as a small, not-for-profit, public foundation more than a decade ago, with the lofty mission of preserving the archaeological, historical, and cultural resources of the Carolinas.

Today that means a wealth of innovative programs.

Like our school programs explaining Black and Native American history to children. "How-to" workshops for adults interested in preserving quilts, photos, and family Bibles. And our collaborative archaeology projects with leading business partners such as Kiawah Resort Associates, International Paper, Westvaco Development Corporation, and The Beach Company to explore both the history and prehistory of our region.

Chicora Foundation is the leader in showing that preservation is not only essential for us as a people, but good business as well. And we remain at the cutting edge of Southern studies with our monograph series, talks at professional meetings, and museum assistance programs.

How can YOU help? Please don't let our fragile heritage become extinct through gradual loss. Join with us in studying the past and teaching it to our future generations. Your generous financial gift to Chicora is a visible expression of your commitment to saving and preserving the important cultural heritage of the Carolinas.